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ABSTRACT

The director of curriculum support services at Oregon's Wasco Education Service District discusses methods that superintendents, board members, and school leaders can use to control conflicts in their school organizations. Surveyed were 239 Oregon school board members and 135 superintendents who were asked to identify which of the following appproaches they most frequently use to resolve conflict: (1) competing; (2) compromising; (3) collaborating; (4) accommodating; and (5) avoiding. The most frequently used method for solving, coping with, or managing conflict is compromise. District size and the cultures found in surrounding communities often influence choice of method. The value of collaboration is emphasized. (14 references) (SI)

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Oregon School Study Council/University of Oregon/Eugene, OR/Vol. 30, No. 1—Fall 1989

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Managing District Conflict

The Practices of Oregon School Board Members and Superintendents

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Director of Curriculum Support Services
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Ask yourself: Is your district fermenting with unnecessary cycles of undesirable and destructive conflict?

Conflict in today's world is a fact of life and an everyday reality for school and nonschool organizations. Although superintendents and board members cannot control the fact that they will face conflicts, they can control the methods they choose to manage those conflicts. School leaders can obtain predictable and even positive outcomes from conflict that is well managed.

Conflicts Rise to the Top

There are numerous levels of conflict in a school setting, but the typical method of approaching unresolved conflict in a school district is to seek solution at a higher level. Of course, within a school district, the highest level is at the top of the organizational chart: the school board and the superintendent. So, for this reason, most school boards and superintendents are "blessed" (or plagued) with numerous conflict-solving engagements on a daily basis. It's not only the cream that rises to the top. One author has gone so far as to say that the roles of superintendents and board members reside at the "site of a battle."

It has been ascertained that superintendents in Oregon have a turnover rate of about every 2.5 years. Milt Baum (1981), associate superintendent of the Oregon Department of Education, suggests this turnover rate is due to numerous new and old conflictual issues superintendents confront. Superintendents' training in conflict management is obviously not keeping up with the problems they face in their daily jobs.

Because Oregon schools are so heavily funded at the local level (Oregon is among the top two or three states in reliance on local property taxes), battles within a district can very often be a sign that

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a district is heading for, or residing in, the "safety-net." Uncontrolled conflict usually means a rough road in community relationships and a lack of positive support for levy/bond issues.

It must be noted that, from an academic point of view, conflict is neither positive nor negative. Instead, we must simply conclude that CONFLICT IS. And the method of managing conflict is very situational. Fortunately, several management approaches are available and can be appropriately applied to a given situation:

1. *Competing*—engaging in direct confrontation
2. *Compromising*—each party giving up something
3. *Collaborating*—two or more parties working together in such a way that both parties obtain their desired outcomes without sacrificing wants and needs
4. *Accommodating*—simply acquiescing to others' positions (letting someone have his or her way can be very effective in certain situations)
5. *Avoiding*—making no direct reference to the act, issue, or decision in question (at times an effective means of coping with a conflict)

Dr. Keller *derived this article from his recent doctoral study regarding governance and administration of public schools in the state of Oregon.*

How Do Oregon School Board Members and Superintendents Cope with Conflict?

This article is a result of a recently completed study of 239 Oregon school board members and 135 superintendents. The major concern of the study was the increasing amount of conflict that board members and superintendents have to contend with on a daily basis; an assumption of the study is that most board members and superintendents have limited educational backgrounds regarding strategies and attitudes they should employ in a conflict situation.

When Oregon school board members and superintendents were asked which of the above five approaches they used when responding to conflict in their respective roles, numerous significant findings emerged. These findings were organized according to (1) board members (both by their gender and the size of their districts); and (2) superintendents (by district size, but not by gender). The responses of these groups were compared to those of a control group consisting of mid- and upper-level managers from business and industry. Significant differences in the ways these groups handle conflict were identified. The analytical instrument used was the Thomas-Kilmann *Management of Differences Exercise*.

Compromise Replaces Competition

Most contemporary board members and superintendents are rather sophisticated and have ac-

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cepted the notion that school organizations, for the most part, have moved past the simplistic view that all conflict resolution is just a matter of "winning or losing." This classical competitive mode is characterized by contesting parties seeing their interests as mutually exclusive. In other words, one group must lose so the other can win. In this view there is no hope that each party can attain its goal. There is only a contest of power that will be decided by fate or a third party, such as a judge or arbitrator:

Because this "win-lose" method is so risky and so destabilizing to bureaucratic organizations and careers, legislatures and courts have often promoted the *compromise* approach to conflict resolution. Unfortunately, although compromise has been institutionalized and has largely augmented or replaced the "win-lose" method of handling conflict, the compromise approach is only a slight improvement. It still has most of the negative attributes of the "win-lose" power strategy, but now both parties must lose something they wanted. Therefore, this approach is often described as a "lose-lose" model..

As you may have guessed by now, Oregon school board members and superintendents, for the most part, use compromise as their first choice for conflict resolution. Compromise has apparently evolved as the official approach to school conflict management/resolution.

The utilization of compromise as a conflict management approach has major negative side effects. Because individuals involved in a compromise have to give up something they presumably wanted, it sets up a situation where ongoing resentments and pressures are retained. Thus, an impulse is set in motion to get back that which was lost. At the first future opportunity to address the issue, it will be contested again, thereby renewing open conflict and even hostility in the district.

The Effect of District Size

As noted above, the most frequently used method for solving, coping with, or managing conflict is compromise. This approach was favored by both superintendents and school board members from all sizes of school districts. The second most popular choices of Oregon board members and superintendents were often related to a district's size. For example, among small-district superintendents the second most widely used method of

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managing conflict was *avoidance*. However, large-district superintendents used *collaborating* almost as often as *compromising*. These consistent patterns of conflict management apparently reflect important differences between large- and small-district superintendents and the influences of their rural and urban communities.

In the rural communities, fighting with people in an open meeting is viewed as destructive to relationships that are limited in number and often not very renewable. Thus, conflicts in small schools are often handled quietly in private, and very often a person's or group's status or lack of longstanding presence in the community will tip the scales for or against them. In contrast, in urban school settings, most patrons' status is dependent on their expertise and the quality of their recent ideas, rather than on their longstanding social status.

The state of Oregon is unique in forcing small and large districts to cooperate with each other to obtain access to expensive educational service. Because of Oregon's Education Service District (ESD) resolution laws, superintendents from small and large districts often come in contact with each others' board members when negotiating and voting for ESD services. As they attempt to influence the

configuration of the annual regional service agreements, superintendents and board members from different-sized districts form unusual combinations (and coalitions) and encounter each others' conflict-coping approaches. In the other states, school leaders from different-sized districts seldom, if ever, come in contact with each other under these circumstances.

Rural/Urban Cultural Differences

Many of the differences between small-school districts and large-school districts are very likely related to the cultures of small and large communities. Recently, there has been a renewed call for Americans to understand other world cultures. Oregon board members and superintendents, when working with their city or rural counterparts, need to recognize, understand, and be patient with each others' cultures and value systems. Unfortunately, the mannerisms peculiar to those at one end of the cultural continuum can be very irritating and offensive to those from the other end. Because these behaviors are on a continuum—it is described by Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman (1958) as from "sacred . . . to . . . secular"—they are often not easily seen as a clear paradigm.

If you visit a board meeting in a small school district, you will observe a small-town, small-talk "breaking-the-ice" ritual. This is in contrast to large-city behavior patterns that are characterized by a scorn for small talk and a predisposition to publicly shout out big social questions and deeply felt beliefs and principles. As a result of these stereotypic patterns there is a tendency for city board members and superintendents to consider the rural school leaders as country-bumpkins and for the rural school people to consider the city people as brash and lacking in concern for their neighbors' well-being.

The accompanying chart lists some typical cultural differences identified by Vidich and Bensman (1958).

An analysis of these differing values and the

Cultural Values Continuum

<———— Rural Sacred ———— Urban Secular ————>

1.	"Small town pattern of small talk . . . and breaking the ice important ritual."	"Small talk is scorned . . . . Social questions... deeply felt beliefs and principles shouted out publicly."
2.	"Etiquette of gossip . . . a must to maintain important neighborly relations."	". . . public attack . . . formal confrontation and open debate are valued."
3.	High value placed on activities devoted to security.	Risk-taking activities are valued.
4.	Status important, not relational (i.e., who you are, not what you say or do.)	Status rationale, measured competitively on your most recent accomplishment(s).
5.	Not much esteem attributed to expertise.	There is a greater appreciation of expertise, but very little respect for designated leader.
6.	Patterns of interaction take place in well delineated groups.	Interaction much more fluid.
7.	Don't trust strangers and cosmopolitan types.	Tend toward pluralistic social structure, and community power is dispersed, though unequally.

mannerisms depicting them helps to explain why small-school superintendents are big users of avoidance as a conflict management approach. To maintain working relationships and neighborly relations, school district leaders try to minimize formal public confrontations. Because status in the community is more important than ideas or one's ability to argue a point, it is useless for a superintendent to flout his or her expertise, unless it is done to support his or her board's position. Conversely, since risk-taking is an urban or secular tendency, it's not too surprising that male board members in large districts have a high inclination to enter "win-lose" competing situations, whereas competing is the least likely approach to be used by a small-district male board member. In fact, small-district male board members are the group most likely to collaborate.

Because small-district male board members are collaborators, they are the study subjects most similar to the control group of business mid- and upper-level managers. This finding is significant because as early as the 1960s, Rensis Likert (1967) determined that this behavioral attribute was the single most important variable contributing to successful enterprises. Therefore, we can speculate that small-district male board members probably, as a population, include more individuals with business backgrounds than the other groups, such as large-district male board members or large-district female board members.

Superintendents in large districts with mostly male board members may find their boards more eager to engage in competing conflict-coping approaches. For this reason, these superintendents can expect to be drawn into more than the average amount of hostile board debates, showcase hearings, and court cases.

Superintendents in large districts having mostly female board members can expect their boards to be the least likely to engage in competing conflict-coping approaches. Instead of competing, the female-dominated boards predictably negotiate to middle-ground positions and even attempt to effect "win-win" collaborating situations whenever possible.

The Value of Collaboration

In an era of diminishing resources, increasing demands for high performance, and more school services, collaboration is a skill that must be valued in the school enterprise. Situations where teachers, administrators, board members, students, and community members collaborate have a greater chance at success to improve school operations than those using any other strategy. This is an integrative process used when the participants' concerns are too important to compromise away.

Collaboration provides a means of testing assumptions and formulating an understanding of other people's views. This results in the merging of insights and provides a new perspective on a problem; thus, there is built-in commitment derived from the incorporation of all views toward the outcome or decision. While the collaborative method of solving a conflict is very effective and tends not to have long-term negative side effects, it does require an investment of time, energy, and expert behavior. For this very reason, it is not used as often as it should be.

An individual considering a superintendency in an Oregon district has a slightly better than 51 percent chance that his or her conflict-coping approaches will *not* be compatible with the conflict-coping approaches of the district's board members. This suggests that the superintendency can be a high-risk endeavor, depending on the size of district, gender of the school board members, and the background and value orientation of the superintendent.

Conclusion

Here is an important question: Is it too late to snatch back conflict resolution from lawyers, judges, mediators, and others whose careers are based on conflict and confrontational situations? In numerous situations they may even promote conflict to attain their goals. Their standard conflict-coping approaches of competing and compromising often breed additional, unnecessary, and disastrous conditions in school districts. Since there is more than ample conflict in districts already, and since bureaucratic organizations like schools are often seriously damaged by conflict, it makes little sense to over-utilize approaches that actually promote additional conflict instead of effecting relatively permanent solutions.

Note: If you were one of the original 442 subjects in

this study, or just interested in this study, please write for a complete copy to: Ernie Keller, Ed.D., Wasco ESD, 422 E. 3rd Street, The Dalles, OR 97058. A loaner copy will be forwarded to you.

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